



## ARTICLES

### SPECIAL SECTION – POLICY COORDINATION IN THE EU: TAKING STOCK OF THE OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION

# ORGANISING SOFT GOVERNANCE IN HARD TIMES – THE UNLIKELY SURVIVAL OF THE OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION IN EU EDUCATION POLICY

ÅSE GORNITZKA \*

TABLE OF CONTENTS: I. Introduction. – II. Theories of organisational change and survival. – II.1. Functional imperatives: organisational survival “on delivery”. – II.2. Power perspective: survival as political battle. – II.3. Institutionalisation and survival. – II.4. Institutional perspective – Survival by riding a fashion wave. – III. The OMC in time and context. – III.1. The birth of OMC education: the European Commission’s administration as facilitator. – III.2. Dealing with Member States’ sensitivity and the politics of education policy. – III.3. Change and reorganisation. – III.4. Soft governance as practices without a label. – IV. Conclusions: why is OMC education an unlikely survivor?

ABSTRACT: The introduction of the OMC brought a new template for organising EU governance and EU social and economic policy coordination. This *Article* looks into how the OMC template for organising governance became practice and developed over time in the education sector. Soft governance under the label OMC has had considerable impact on the approach to common decision-making in EU education policy. The OMC template enabled European level policy makers to enter into issues that had largely been off limits to the EU. The actors, especially the Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC), used the OMC format to work around the considerable national sensitivity of education. This way of organising governance was normalised as an appropriate approach to cooperation. The substantive effects on Member States’ policy and policy output are, on the other hand, limited. Hence, the functional effectiveness cannot explain the survival of the OMC education. Yet, the soft coordination organised under the heading “Education and Training 2010/2020” survived because the practices incrementally gained legitimacy and became routine. The organisation of governance based on the OMC also became the platform upon which the sector could defend and profile its contribution to European integration. Despite the fact that the OMC label was no longer considered a fashionable and effective organisational template on the EU governance scene, the education sector upheld these governance arrangements.

\* Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, ase.gornitzka@stv.uio.no. I am truly indebted to Evangelia Psychogiopoulou for comments and input to this *Article*. Without her insight and patience, this *Article* would not have been completed.

KEYWORDS: governance – open method of coordination – education – European Union – organisational change – institutionalisation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Political organisation impacts who has access to political decision-making, the weight given to decision-making premises, the interests and perspectives that are attended to and subsequently the very content of collective decisions and their distributional effects.<sup>1</sup> The same goes for the way in which collective decisions are implemented and put into effect.<sup>2</sup> Hence, it is key to study how the organisations of political administrative systems come about, change, survive or even die. Hence, we turn our attention to “organisation structure”, i.e. the formal, normative structure containing the expectations that define who is meant to do what, how and when.<sup>3</sup> In addition, such formal structures can develop into institutions when organisations take on informal cultures and practices that are taken for granted and have a value in their own right.

Although political orders in established democracies tend to be upheld by a grid of formal organisations, these organisations change, be it through grand reforms or piecemeal incremental adjustments.<sup>4</sup> Political-administrative organisations at the European supranational level are especially interesting for the study of new organisations and emerging institutions. They are part of the unfolding experiment of organising the governance architecture of the European Union. The early “inventions”, the European Commission (Commission) especially, have since their establishment proven fairly resilient. New organisations have continuously been added to the EU. This is especially the case with European agencies as newcomers in the EU regulatory space.<sup>5</sup> One of the episodes that brought new templates for organising EU governance took place when the EU launched a new approach to EU social and economic policy coordination and the in-

<sup>1</sup> M. EGEBERG, *An Organisational Approach to European Integration: Outline of a Complementary Perspective*, in *European Journal of Political Research*, 2004, p. 199 *et seq.*; J.G. MARCH, J.P. OLSEN, *The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders*, in *International Organization*, 1998, p. 943 *et seq.*; J.P. OLSEN, *Change and Continuity – An Institutional Approach to Institutions of Democratic Government*, in *European Political Science Review*, 2009, p. 3 *et seq.*

<sup>2</sup> C. KNILL, D. LIEFFERINK, *Environmental Politics in the European Union: Policy-making, Implementation and Patterns of Multi-level Governance*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> M. EGEBERG, Å. GORNITZKA, J. TRONDAL, *Organization Theory – An Organizational Approach to Governance*, in C. ANSELL, J. TORFING (eds), *Handbook on Theories of Governance*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016, p. 32 *et seq.*

<sup>4</sup> J.G. MARCH, J.P. OLSEN, *Organizing Political Life: What Administrative Reorganization Tells us about Government*, in *American Political Science Review*, 1983, p. 281 *et seq.*

<sup>5</sup> M. EGEBERG, J. TRONDAL, *EU-level Agencies: New Executive Centre Formation or Vehicles for National Control?*, in *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2011, p. 868 *et seq.*; E. VOS, *Reforming the European Commission: What Role to Play for EU Agencies?*, in *Common Market Law Review*, 2000, p. 1113 *et seq.*

roduction of the OMC.<sup>6</sup> The Lisbon European Council set up the OMC as a brand with the following four elements as its main characteristics: 1) identifying and defining common goals for the Union with specific timetables for achieving them; 2) establishing indicators and benchmarks for assessing progress towards the goals; 3) translating common objectives to national and regional policies taking into account national and regional differences; and 4) engaging in periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as mutual learning processes.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the OMC education governance arrangements developed in a way that stayed close to the core elements of the original template coined in the Lisbon strategy.

Since the early proliferation of OMC-like governance arrangements in several different sectors these arrangements have been following different development trajectories.<sup>8</sup> This *Article* looks into how the OMC template for organising governance became practice and developed over time as a case of organisational change in European governance of the education sector. The analysis turns our attention to the origins of these governance arrangements and the question of what sustains them and how they evolve over time. In line with institutional perspective on organisations it seems clear that if we want to know whether organised governance arrangements will survive, we have to conceptualise and explain organisational change itself.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the idea is to explore how this OMC arrangement as a way of organising governance in the field of education survived when similar constructions in other policy sectors were to a large extent abandoned, or swallowed by neighbouring governance arrangements as EU governance entered more turbulent times. The aim is to come closer to an understanding of the factors that affect organisational survival and the conditions that allow some governance arrangements to be sustainable and others not. Accordingly, this *Article* asks: to what extent did the OMC in the field of education survive and what factors have been central to shaping its development? The analysis starts out by outlining four theoretical perspectives on organisational change that can assist us in making sense of organisational change and survival of the OMC education and then extracting some general lessons from this particular case. It then identifies the context and historical roots of EU education policy and the development trajectory the OMC education as a governance architecture has undergone from the turn of the century when the structures for policy

<sup>6</sup> J. ZEITLIN, *The Open Method of Coordination in Action: Theoretical Promise, Empirical Realities, Reform Strategy*, in J. ZEITLIN, P. POCHE (eds), *The Open Method of Coordination in Action: The European Employment and Social Inclusion Strategies*, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2005; p. 447 *et seq.*

<sup>7</sup> European Council Conclusions of 23-24 March 2000.

<sup>8</sup> B. LAFFAN, C. SHAW, *Classifying and Mapping OMC in Different Policy Areas*, 29 July 2005, [www.eu-newgov.org](http://www.eu-newgov.org).

<sup>9</sup> K. THELEN, *Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*, in *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2009, p. 471 *et seq.*

coordination began up to current practices that still embody the main organisational ideas launched under the label “OMC”.<sup>10</sup>

This *Article* is based on a case study of the practice of policy coordination in EU research and education policy concluded in 2007, the findings from several studies conducted on the OMC in education as well as updated documentary evidence on how the OMC is practiced currently.<sup>11</sup>

## II. THEORIES OF ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE AND SURVIVAL

An organisational approach to European integration focuses on individual actors’ organisational context in order to account for their behaviour, interests and identities. In his third footnote to organisational change, James G. March argues that theories of organisational change are primarily different ways of describing theories of action in organisations, not different theories.<sup>12</sup> This implies that we can draw on theories of organisational action in order to make sense of how organisations come about, change, disappear or gain a life of their own. Below four arguments about organisational change and survival drawn from organisation theories are outlined.

### II.1. FUNCTIONAL IMPERATIVES: ORGANISATIONAL SURVIVAL “ON DELIVERY”

A functional-instrumental perspective assumes that change occurs through functional adaptation. In the case of organising European governance the argument is that European integration needs regulation and coordination to deliver on its core integrative goals, i.e. adjustment to the main objectives of the integration project. New organisational arrangements will reflect the basic needs and functional solutions to overcome collective action problems.<sup>13</sup> The actors’ consideration with *functional efficiency* determines the choice and design of organisations. Moreover, history is efficient in the sense that arrangements that do not “deliver” will be rearranged or replaced. Change is driven by changes in the problems that governance arrangements are designed to tackle – from the point of view of this perspective organisations are, after all, functional imperatives.<sup>14</sup> That organisations have functions is reasonable and fairly well documented in the study of political order. Referring to these functions as an *account* for the estab-

<sup>10</sup> This section builds on Å. GORNITZKA, *The Lisbon Process: A Supranational Policy Perspective*, in P. MAASSEN, J.P. OLSEN (eds), *University Dynamics and European Integration*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2007, p. 155 *et seq.*; Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy: Crisis, Collisions and Sectoral Defence*, in J. NIXON (ed.), *Higher Education in Austerity Europe*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 47 *et seq.*

<sup>11</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The Lisbon Process*, cit., p. 155 *et seq.*

<sup>12</sup> J.G. MARCH, *Footnotes to Organizational Change*, in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1981, p. 563 *et seq.*

<sup>13</sup> J. TALLBERG, *Explaining the Institutional Foundations of European Union Negotiations*, in *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2010, p. 633 *et seq.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

ishment and change of such organisation is, however, not satisfactory. As argued by Paul Pierson, there are obvious limits to the rational design of organisations.<sup>15</sup>

## II.2. POWER PERSPECTIVE: SURVIVAL AS POLITICAL BATTLE

One of these limits concerns the question of power in design and change. Within this perspective, institutional choice reflects the power constellations in a political order. This argument can be used to explain how EU governance arrangements come about and take their form. For example, the EU has established an extensive “Eurocracy” outside of the Commission hierarchy, including over 30 European agencies and a number of networks of national regulatory authorities. Their establishment has been explained with reference to the politics of institutional choice in the EU, explaining why EU policy-makers create agencies in some policy areas, while opting for looser regulatory networks in others. The design of the EU’s governance arrangements is driven not by functional imperatives but by political considerations related to distributional conflict and the influence of supranational actors.<sup>16</sup> This perspective takes on board the fairly well established idea from organisational studies: organisations and the very structure that they consist of reflect the relative power of actors with different interests. Organisations in a political order are in this respect not “neutral” but “the mobilization of bias”.<sup>17</sup> Power and influence are not equally distributed and stable over time. Organisations are a collection of coalitions and when the coalitions change and their power base is in flux, organisations can change. Hence, it is asymmetrical power relationships and bargaining that shape the design of governance arrangements. Powerful actors initiate new organisations or reform existing organisations to further their interests. The distributive implications of organisations are the primary concern. Organisations are structured to favour the most resourceful actors and in this respect organisations are mirrors of power.<sup>18</sup>

## II.3. INSTITUTIONALISATION AND SURVIVAL

According to institutional theory we can expect organisations to take on the properties of institutions. They develop action rules and practices that are embedded in a structure of meaning (that explains and justifies these rules and practices) and a structure of

<sup>15</sup> P. PIERSON, *The Limits of Design: Explaining Institutional Change*, in *Governance*, 2000, p. 475 *et seq.*

<sup>16</sup> T. IDEMA, D.R. KELEMEN, *New Modes of Governance, the Open Method of Co-ordination and other Fashionable Red Herring*, in *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 2006, p. 108 *et seq.*; R.D. KELEMEN, A.D. TARRANT, *The Political Foundations of the Eurocracy*, in *West European Politics*, 2011, p. 922 *et seq.*

<sup>17</sup> E.E. SCHATTSCHNEIDER, *The Semisovereign People. A Realist View of Democracy in America*, Hindsdale: Dryden Press, 1961, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> J.G. MARCH, *Footnotes to Organizational Change*, cit., p. 563 *et seq.*; J. TALLBERG, *Explaining the Institutional Foundations*, cit., p. 633 *et seq.*

resources that makes it possible to act according to the rules.<sup>19</sup> Organisations will over time tend to take on a life of their own and become “living institutions”.<sup>20</sup> Some modes of action within organisational settings become codified, standardised and “taken for granted”. This reduces uncertainty and ambiguity, as well as dependence on functional efficiency or powerful coalitions that uphold organisational settings. There is less need to justify resources and patterns of conduct within these organised settings as actors follow a logic of appropriateness rather than a logic of consequentiality.<sup>21</sup> According to an institutional perspective, institutional arrangements will be path dependent and cannot be easily changed according to shifts in political will and power constellations, deliberate design and reorganisation, or by environmental “necessities”.<sup>22</sup> As maturity and density of institutional structures grow over time, they gain operational autonomy and become institutionalised, infused with value “beyond the technical requirement of the task at hand”,<sup>23</sup> becoming “a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices. Embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are *relatively invariant* in the face of turnover of individuals and *relatively resilient* to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances”.<sup>24</sup>

Such insights underline how the organisation of governance can be relatively insulated and “sticky”. Yet it does not mean that governance arrangements are static. First, they are more vulnerable in the earlier stages of their life cycle when codes of conduct and meaning are less settled, that is, organisational “age” matters (the “liability of newness”).<sup>25</sup> In the context of European integration, new governance architectures are established on top of an already established set of national political orders, based on the idea of national sovereignty and national sovereign institutions. We can expect such organisational arrangements to create stickiness, making it difficult for new ways of organising governance to develop independently.<sup>26</sup> In sum, new organisations are not likely to survive and develop a life of their own. In particular it has been argued that the degree of national sensitivity of a policy area is a particularly relevant framework condi-

<sup>19</sup> J.G. MARCH, J.P. OLSEN, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics*, New York: Free Press, 1989; J.G. MARCH, J.P. OLSEN, *Elaborating the “New Institutionalism”*, in R.A.W. RHODES, S. BINDER, B. ROCKMAN (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 3 *et seq.*

<sup>20</sup> B. LAFFAN, *Becoming a “Living Institution”: The Evolution of the European Court of Auditors*, in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 1999, p. 251 *et seq.*

<sup>21</sup> J.G. MARCH, J.P. OLSEN, *Elaborating the “New Institutionalism”*, cit., p. 3 *et seq.*

<sup>22</sup> J.G. MARCH, J.P. OLSEN, *Rediscovering Institutions*, cit.

<sup>23</sup> P. SELZNICK, *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

<sup>24</sup> J.G. MARCH, J.P. OLSEN, *Elaborating the “New Institutionalism”*, cit., p. 3 (emphasis added).

<sup>25</sup> M.A. HAGER, J. GALASKIEWICZ, J.A. LARSON, *Structural Embeddedness and the Liability of Newness among Nonprofit Organizations*, in *Public Management Review*, 2004, p. 159 *et seq.*

<sup>26</sup> P. PIERSON, *The Limits of Design*, cit., p. 490.

tion.<sup>27</sup> Yet if new governance architectures survive the early stages, we can expect them to adapt incrementally. Radical change will only occur at “critical moments” of overt performance failure and crisis. These are occasions for questioning normative and causal beliefs, as well as the effectiveness and legitimacy of existing governance arrangements, upsetting fundamental understandings of what constitutes appropriate problems and solutions, resource distribution and legitimate actors in a policy domain. Performance crisis is thus a key determinant for de-institutionalisation.<sup>28</sup> Interventions and changes that are unacceptable at other times become possible in times of performance and legitimacy crises.<sup>29</sup> Similar arguments have been put forward to account for how the EU appears to be responding to the failures of incremental reforms by taking new steps to expand the scope and intensity of integration, e.g. in the governance of Europe’s Economic and Monetary Union.<sup>30</sup>

#### II.4. INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE – SURVIVAL BY RIDING A FASHION WAVE

Finally, also building on institutional scholarship, a theory of organisational change as diffusion and isomorphism shifts the analytical focus to external pressures for change stemming from institutional environments and organisational fields. Changes in the organisation of governance, including establishing new governance arrangements can be explained by fashions and fads, i.e. widely held ideas and norms on how to organise modern governance arrangements.<sup>31</sup> Under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty, legitimacy-seeking organisations will adhere to cultural rules and cognitive templates within the wider institutional environment. Structures and procedures associated with modernity appear as pressure waves, as short-term organisational fashions<sup>32</sup> or long-term, deep trends with global reach.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *Networking Administration in Areas of National Sensitivity – The Commission and European Higher Education*, in A. AMARAL, P. MAASSEN, C. MUSSELIN, G. NEAVE (eds), *European Integration and the Governance of Higher Education and Research*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2009, p. 109 *et seq.*

<sup>28</sup> C. OLIVER, *The Antecedents of Deinstitutionalization*, in *Organization Studies*, 1992, p. 563 *et seq.*

<sup>29</sup> J.P. OLSEN, *Democratic Government, Institutional Autonomy and the Dynamics of Change*, in *West European Politics*, 2009, p. 439 *et seq.*

<sup>30</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 47 *et seq.*; E. JONES, R.D. KELEMEN, S. MEUNIER, *Failing Forward? The Euro Crisis and the Incomplete Nature of European Integration*, in *Comparative Political Studies*, 2016, p. 1010 *et seq.*

<sup>31</sup> E. ABRAHAMSON, *Managerial Fads and Fashions – The Diffusion and Rejection of Innovations*, in *Academy of Management Review*, 1991, p. 586 *et seq.*; J.W. MEYER, B. ROWAN, *Institutionalized Organizations – Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony*, in *American Journal of Sociology*, 1977, p. 340 *et seq.*; P.S. TOLBERT, L.G. ZUCKER, *Institutional Sources of Change in the Formal Structure of Organizations: The Diffusion of Civil Service Reform, 1880-1935*, in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1983, p. 22 *et seq.*

<sup>32</sup> E. ABRAHAMSON, *Managerial Fads and Fashions*, cit., p. 586 *et seq.*

<sup>33</sup> J.W. MEYER, B. ROWAN, *Institutionalized Organizations*, cit., p. 340 *et seq.*

### III. THE OMC IN TIME AND CONTEXT

In the early years of the history of European integration education policy was firmly based on the idea of closed national systems, founded on the basic principle that the particular character of education systems in the Member States should be fully respected, while coordinated interaction between education, training and employment systems should be improved.<sup>34</sup> While vocational training was identified as an area of Community action in the Treaty of Rome in 1957, education was formally recognised as an area of EU competence with the Treaty of Maastricht. The Treaty of Maastricht granted a complementary/supporting role to the EU – the legal instruments available for EU action in the field were limited to the so-called “incentive measures” and recommendations – in short no harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States. Education policy was among the areas where Member States were unwilling to give up power and competence to the EU. The educational domain touched the heart of politics and national identity<sup>35</sup> and national welfare regimes.<sup>36</sup> From the mid-1980s, especially with the establishment of the first Erasmus programme, mobility within and between national education systems became a focus area of the Commission and Member State cooperation. Interest in educational cooperation was triggered by the work to complete the Single Market by 1992 and the idea of European citizenship. From the mid-1990s until the turn of the century, EU Member States and the Commission showed signs of broadening their ambitions, increasing the range and level of common action. When the student mobility programme Erasmus was revamped and renamed the Socrates programme in 1994, it signalled an accentuation of the involvement of the *subnational* level of European integration in the educational domain.<sup>37</sup> The educational institutions gained more responsibility in the activities created by the programme. This represented a certain European “crack” in national education systems. Moreover, this period saw an increase in the ambition of the EU to encourage joint learning by students from different national backgrounds and to develop European curricula – an area that had traditionally been extremely nationally sensitive. Later on, the inclusion of Central and Eastern Europe in the student mobility programme greatly expanded the geographical reach of EU education cooperation. In sum cooperation ambitions in the area of education increased over the years and this policy domain was to some extent institutionalised.<sup>38</sup> The European agenda for education also put greater weight on economic rationales for education policy, a development that also was

<sup>34</sup> J. HUISMAN, M. VAN DER WENDE, *On Cooperation and Competition*, Bonn: Lemmens, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Y.N. SOYSAL, D. STRANG, *Construction of the First Mass Education Systems in Nineteenth-century Europe*, in *Sociology of Education*, 1989, p. 277 *et seq.*

<sup>36</sup> M.R. BUSEMEYER, C. TRAMPUSCH, *The Political Economy of Collective Skill Formation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> J. HUISMAN, M. VAN DER WENDE, *On Cooperation and Competition*, cit.

<sup>38</sup> H. WALKENHORST, *Explaining Change in EU Education Policy*, in *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2008, p. 567 *et seq.*

noticeable at the national level in several EU Member States.<sup>39</sup> The EU paid administrative and political attention to education policy – in the committees of the European Parliament, the relevant Council of Ministers' configuration and notably in the administrative structure of the Commission. Yet, the transfer of legal competences to EU institutions did not match these ambitions and capacities.<sup>40</sup> Evidently, the legal and financial means of governance nation states had at their disposal completely dwarfed the EU's capacity for action in education. As education systems remained a national prerogative in the eyes of the electorate, the legal basis and political attention of EU institutions and EU leaders placed education at the margins.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, the EU built up a tradition for dealing with the educational sector and especially vocational training (where mutual recognition of professional degrees did have a basis in EU law) and with respect to student mobility. The EU education policy arena was not entirely empty. On this basis new governance arrangements were built at the turn of the century.

This is important for understanding what happened when the EU embarked on the so-called Lisbon strategy in 2000.<sup>42</sup> The Lisbon process is a landmark for European education policy: when EU heads of state publicly stated the EU's ambition to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, this positioned education in the interface with the EU's economic and social policy. Education received attention in Lisbon as part of a much larger agenda and political project. The Lisbon strategy expressed greater coordination expectations, not only between territorial levels but also across sectors, i.e. an opportunity for horizontal integration of policy sectors that had operated independently of each other. The Lisbon strategy defined the whole knowledge and skills area as a necessary component of an economic and social reform strategy. The Commission's Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC) pushed the education sector's contribution to this strategy and the visibility of the education sector as a whole. The reference the Lisbon Spring Council in 2000 made to the OMC also opened a procedural way forward for how the education sector could organise in a different way, i.e. a new governance template to match the new ideas about the EU's transition to the knowledge economy.

The Lisbon European Council invited the education ministers of the EU Member States to formulate future goals for the education sector and work towards the modernisation of education systems across Europe. The Lisbon summit sought to address challenges of globalisation and the new knowledge-driven economy.<sup>43</sup> The goals for ed-

<sup>39</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, P. MAASSEN, *National Policies Concerning the Economic Role of Higher Education*, in *Higher Education Policy*, 2000, p. 225 *et seq.*

<sup>40</sup> E. BEUKEL, *Educational Policy: Institutionalization and Multi-Level Governance*, in S.S. ANDERSEN, K.A. ELIASSEN (eds), *Making Policy in Europe*, London: Sage, 2001, p. 124 *et seq.*

<sup>41</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, *cit.*, p. 57 *et seq.*

<sup>42</sup> European Council Conclusions of 23-24 March 2000.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, paras 25-27.

education agreed upon as part of the Lisbon strategy were so broad that they left the entire policy domain open. In 2001 three strategic objectives were adopted that concerned quality and effectiveness of education, access to education and opening up national education and training systems to society and “the wider world”.<sup>44</sup> This was turned into a 10-year work programme containing 13 specified objectives.<sup>45</sup> The Commission prepared the documents and the Education Council quickly agreed on these strategic goals. The goals that education ministers agreed on hardly touched any overtly controversial or sensitive issues. Nonetheless, the establishment of OMC education indicates a change of attitude towards European coordinating efforts among European Ministers of Education. The main elements of the inception and construction of the governance architecture are as follows.

### III.1. THE BIRTH OF OMC EDUCATION: THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION’S ADMINISTRATION AS FACILITATOR

The Commission’s DG EAC was central in the process of setting up the OMC. Without DG EAC’s organisational capacity and attention attached to the OMC this organisational innovation would not have been included in the governance arrangements of EU education policy. DG EAC translated the template coined in the European Council’s conclusions and started constructing the committee/working group structure, a framework of benchmarks, goals and indicators, as well as the format for how Member States could report on their progress. Hence, the inception of the OMC into EU education policy was from the very start marked by the active role of the Commission’s DG. DG EAC acted as procedural and ideational entrepreneur for creating and maintaining OMC. The national experts that served on OMC working groups were for the most part from national ministries of education. This brought the Commission close to national political-administrative leadership in some key areas of education policy. In addition, over 30 different social partners and stakeholder organisations were invited by the DG EAC to be part of the working groups.<sup>46</sup> The sector’s transnational and administrative networks were brought together under the umbrella of the OMC governance architecture. They gathered in Brussels and in Member States for peer learning activities in most areas of education policy, such as access to education, approaches to teaching and learning basic skills, funding and organisational issues, counselling, information and communication technology and so on. The core actors in the

<sup>44</sup> European Council Conclusions of 23-24 March 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Council and Commission, *Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe*, 14 June 2002, publications.europa.eu. The Work Programme was endorsed by the European Council (European Council Conclusions of 15-16 March 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Most notably European level associations such as Union of Industrial and Employers’ Confederations of Europe (UNICE), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE)/Education International, European School Heads Association, European Parents’ Association, European University Association, National Union of Students in Europe.

field populated the new governance site. This enhanced and expanded the European networks of national administrations and stakeholders.

### III.2. DEALING WITH MEMBER STATES' SENSITIVITY AND THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION POLICY

From early 2004 two other parallel processes, the intergovernmental process towards establishing the European Higher Education Area ("The Bologna Process") and the EU's "Copenhagen Process" for vocational education and training, were added in order to include the whole range and forms of education. From then on the OMC process in education was referred to as "Education and Training 2010" (ET 2010).<sup>47</sup> Despite its non-EU status and the fact that the Commission was initially not invited to join in decision-making, the Bologna Process was an unprecedented initiative in the history of European integration and (higher) education and a surprising procedural innovation in European governance of higher education.<sup>48</sup> This demonstrated that cooperation around common objectives was possible even in nationally sensitive areas and this format gave the sector's own political leaders the room to control the process themselves. In this way, Ministers of Education gained experience in coordination practices that had been unthinkable only a decade earlier. The same has been observed with respect to cooperation in the area of education qualifications.<sup>49</sup>

The political agreement, anchored in the Education Council and legitimised by the European Council, on the content of the new cooperation was at the root of this development.<sup>50</sup> This agreement was somewhat unexpected, given the sensitive nature of the education domain and the historical legacies in this sector with respect to the will and interests of national education ministers in EU cooperation. Moreover, another external event that cushioned the national sensitivity of education policy came from the shock of the publication of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000 comparative study of school children's basic skills, which was felt especially in several

<sup>47</sup> Communication COM(2003) 685 final of 11 November 2003 from the Commission, *"Education & Training 2010": The success of the Lisbon Strategy hinges on urgent reforms (Draft joint interim report on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe)*.

<sup>48</sup> P. RAVINET, *From Voluntary Participation to Monitored Coordination: Why European Countries Feel Increasingly Bound by Their Commitment to the Bologna Process*, in *European Journal of Education*, 2008, p. 353 *et seq.*

<sup>49</sup> M. ELKEN, *New EU Instruments for Education: Vertical, Horizontal and Internal Tensions in the European Qualifications Framework*, in *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 2015, p. 69 *et seq.*

<sup>50</sup> 2006 Joint Interim Report 2006/C 79/01 of the Council and the Commission of 14 February 2006 on progress under the "Education & Training 2010" work programme, *Modernising Education and Training: A Vital Contribution to Prosperity and Social Cohesion in Europe*.

national Ministries of Education.<sup>51</sup> As argued elsewhere, the Member States' response to the ET 2010 and OMC template was also coloured by the challenge of coordinating employment policies.<sup>52</sup> Prior to the Lisbon European Council, the European Employment Strategy (EES) had already included lifelong learning as an area of cooperation.<sup>53</sup> National Ministers of Education were nudged towards defending the educational domain. Under the EES, decisions with implications for core educational issues were not decided by European ministers of education, but by national ministers running the employment portfolios, and prepared by DG Employment and not DG EAC. The skills and educational "elements" of the EES were then also followed up nationally (in the National Action Plans) primarily by the ministries of labour, not the ministries of education. The OMC process became a way of reclaiming European cooperation in the area of lifelong learning from the EES and fending off the invasion of the labour market/employment perspective of the educational policy turf. In addition, DG EAC had worked extensively on a lifelong learning agenda already from the mid-1990s.<sup>54</sup> This agenda had been subject to a long consultation process with Member States and stakeholders. The establishment of OMC education could then be read as defence of a sector enacted by the core European institutions in the field of education.<sup>55</sup>

### III.3. CHANGE AND REORGANISATION

In 2005 the OMC structure was partly reorganised and new areas of attention were included.<sup>56</sup> Two new organisational elements were added that further institutionalised the OMC: a high level group (consisting of representatives of national administrations) charged with maintaining stronger links to national administrations and producing input on the reporting processes, and a large ET 2010 coordination group, that also included the social partners. A new governance site was undoubtedly being institutionalised, although not all elements were normalised equally.

<sup>51</sup> See e.g. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, *Literacy Skills for the World of Tomorrow. Further Results from PISA 2000. Executive Summary*, 2003, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org).

<sup>52</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The Lisbon Process*, cit., p. 155 *et seq.*; Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 47 *et seq.*

<sup>53</sup> P. POCHE, *The Open Method of Coordination and the Construction of Social Europe: a Historical Perspective*, in J. ZEITLIN, P. POCHE (eds), *The Open Method of Coordination in Action*, cit., p. 37 *et seq.*

<sup>54</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The Lisbon Process*, cit., p. 155 *et seq.*

<sup>55</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 47 *et seq.*

<sup>56</sup> See the clusters on Modernisation of higher education, on Teachers and trainers in Vocational Education and Training, on Making best use of resources, on Maths, Science and Technology, on Access and social inclusion in lifelong learning, on Key competencies, and ICT, on Recognition of learning outcomes, Adult learning, and Lifelong guidance policy network. Most of these clusters were a continuation of the working groups that had been established in the infancy of the OMC (see Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 47 *et seq.*).

In this period – half way into the Lisbon strategy – the OMC approach to European integration came under fire.<sup>57</sup> The OMC was no longer in fashion. Yet, unlike some of the other OMCs that had been established, the OMC education survived this “public attack”. Notably, the governance approach of the OMC education – soft coordination based on peer learning and subtle “naming shaming and faming” through benchmarks and reporting – was not effective in terms of attaining the common and country specific goals. With one major exception: increasing the number of graduates in maths, sciences and engineering. There was little evidence to suggest that practicing the OMC and coordinating policies in this way had a demonstrable impact on national education policy and the national organisation of education governance.<sup>58</sup> In terms of progress towards common goals, the governance arrangement had failed to deliver. Nonetheless, several of the elements of the OMC arrangements increasingly showed signs of institutionalisation in this consolidation phase. The OMC education had survived “the liability of newness”.

The quantified aspects of the OMC process were deeply institutionalised, such as the role of the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (consisting of Member States’ experts and organised by the DG EAC). Indicator development also gained a strong position when a specific Centre for Research on Education and Lifelong Learning (CRELL) was established as part of the Commission’s Joint Research Centre. The legal basis for Eurostat’s education statistics was strengthened. To this day, CRELL continues to monitor the EU 2020 headline targets in education and training and conducts analysis to feed policy decisions at the EU level.<sup>59</sup>

Reporting from the implementation of ET 2010 became fairly well established as a routine. Since 2011, DG EAC published an annual Education and Training Monitor with in-depth country reports.<sup>60</sup> However, the organisation and practices for policy learning and peer review was an ongoing experiment. The adjustment of the OMC architecture implied that DG EAC set up eight “clusters” that corresponded to key priorities identified in the ET 2010 work programme. Member States could participate in each cluster according to their own priorities. Each cluster was coordinated by an official from DG EAC. The format for the clusters implied organising learning through Peer Learning Activities, the so-called PLAs.<sup>61</sup> Toward the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century this governance site had thus settled to become a fairly regularised activity at the EU level, extending its activities to the national level with the PLAs and national reporting.

<sup>57</sup> For a summary of this period, see L. THOLONIAT, *The Career of the Open Method of Coordination: Lessons from a “Soft” EU Instrument*, in *West European Politics*, 2010, p. 93 *et seq.*

<sup>58</sup> N. ALEXIADOU, B. LANGE, *Europeanizing the National Education Space? Adjusting to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the UK*, in *International Journal of Public Administration*, 2015, p. 157 *et seq.*

<sup>59</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 54 *et seq.*

<sup>60</sup> See Commission, *European Training Monitor*, ec.europa.eu.

<sup>61</sup> B. LANGE, N. ALEXIADOU, *Policy Learning and Governance of Education Policy in the EU*, in *Journal of Education Policy*, 2010, p. 443 *et seq.*

The impact on national education policy and its goals was very difficult to document even ten years into the existence of this governance arrangement at the European level.<sup>62</sup> Despite this, the governance arrangement expanded its territory. In addition to the progress report on the common European objectives in education and training, the groups provided input to a string of Commission communications and recommendations on education and training. This implies that a connection was established between the regular policy making processes of the EU (production of EU official policy documents) and the processes upheld by the OMC governance architecture. We see this especially in the efforts to establish a stronger EU take on educational standards through the European Qualifications Framework (EQF),<sup>63</sup> adopted in 2008 and in the guidelines for European Quality in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET).<sup>64</sup> The same applies to higher education policy and the work on the modernisation agenda of the European universities.<sup>65</sup>

Yet, the development of the OMC as governance architecture was not entirely untouched by events outside the educational policy domain. Most importantly, in June 2010, EU leaders adopted "Europe 2020" as the new strategy for creating jobs and promoting "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth".<sup>66</sup> This implied a major overhaul of the governance architecture. One major change is particularly relevant here: the introduction of the European Semester in 2011, which combines governance instruments in economic and social governance of the EU within one single annual policy coordination cycle.<sup>67</sup> The aim of the European Semester was to improve economic policy coordination in the Union and push towards implementation of the EU's economic rules.<sup>68</sup> The

<sup>62</sup> N. ALEXIADOU, D. FINK-HAFNER, B. LANGE, *Education Policy Convergence Through the Open Method of Coordination: Theoretical Reflections and Implementation in "old" and "new" National Contexts*, in *European Educational Research Journal*, 2010, p. 345 *et seq.*; B. LANGE, N. ALEXIADOU, *Policy Learning and Governance of Education Policy in the EU*, *cit.*, p. 443 *et seq.*

<sup>63</sup> European Qualifications Framework, [www.cedefop.europa.eu](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu).

<sup>64</sup> M. ELKEN, *New EU Instruments for Education: Vertical, Horizontal and Internal Tensions in the European Qualifications Framework*, in *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 2015, p. 69 *et seq.*

<sup>65</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *Bologna in Context: A Horizontal Perspective on the Dynamics of Governance Sites for a Europe of Knowledge*, in *European Journal of Education*, 2010, p. 535 *et seq.*

<sup>66</sup> Communication COM(2010) 2020 final of 3 March 2010 from the Commission, *Europe 2020: A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth*.

<sup>67</sup> J. ZEITLIN, B. VANHERCKE, *Socializing the European Semester? Economic Governance and Social Policy coordination in Europe 2020*, in *Economic Governance and Social Policy Coordination in Europe, 2020*, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies Report no. 7, 2014, [www.sieps.se](http://www.sieps.se).

<sup>68</sup> The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) and the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP), see Regulation (EC) 1466/97 of the Council of 7 July 1997 on the strengthening of the surveillance of budgetary positions and the surveillance and coordination of economic policies; Regulation (EC) 1467/97 of the Council of 7 July 1997 on speeding up and clarifying the implementation of the excessive deficit procedure; Regulation (EU) 1174/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 on enforcement measures to correct excessive macroeconomic imbalances in the euro area; Regulation (EU) 1176/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances.

European Semester set-up gave a clearer and stronger role in policy coordination to the Commission – not only would the Commission set out the EU priorities for the coming year in the autumn of each year (Annual Growth Survey) but it would also publish its opinions on each country's draft budgetary plan. Moreover, the Commission took on a new role in issuing Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for budgetary and economic policies, after each country has presented its Stability/Convergence Programme and its National Reform Programme, which set out the Member States' budgetary and economic policies respectively. The Council discusses these recommendations, amends them if deemed appropriate and adopts them.<sup>69</sup> The CRS was a complement to the governance structures set up on the basis of the OMC.<sup>70</sup>

These changes represented a fairly dramatic transformation of the whole context within which the OMC education operated. The response of the education sector, however, shows the resilience of the established approach and the continued defence of the education sector's position through the use of the OMC governance architecture. As elaborated and evidenced elsewhere, these changes in circumstances and the crises experienced in the EU at the time, did not translate into a threat to the governance arrangements erected under the umbrella of OMC education.<sup>71</sup> The OMC retained its shape as a major approach to education policy at the EU level, but the label as such was not used in the same way as in the first decade of cooperation. The OMC governance approach largely survived the crises that defined the EU working environment in this period. However, the reference to the "OMC" in the EU education policy documents in recent years is minimal. The label has more or less vanished from the documents as the legitimising reference but the structures set up under the OMC are still in operation, though under the label "Education and training 2020". The EU "presentation of self" on the DG EAC websites is as follows:

"Each EU country is responsible for its own education and training systems. EU policy is designed to support national action and help address common challenges, such as ageing societies, skills deficits in the workforce, technological developments and global competition. Education and training 2020 (ET 2020) is the framework for cooperation in education and training. ET 2020 is a forum for exchanges of best practices, mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms".<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Z. DARVAS, Á. LEANDRO, *The Limitations of Policy Coordination in the Euro Area Under the European Semester*, in *Bruegel Policy Contribution*, 2015, bruegel.org.

<sup>70</sup> L. VOLANTE, J. RITZEN, *The European Union, Education Governance and International Education Surveys*, in *Policy Futures in Education*, 2016, p. 988 *et seq.*

<sup>71</sup> The full argument can be found in Á. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 54 *et seq.*

<sup>72</sup> Commission, *Strategic framework – Education & Training 2020*, ec.europa.eu.

The sector specific work programme is showcased here as well as how this is compatible with the continued national sensitivity of the education policy sectors. The approach matches citizen preference for European integration in this area.<sup>73</sup> The Commission presents this governance architecture as a forum where mutual learning is the key mechanism for implementing the common political agenda. This underlines how implementation of the agenda (after 20 years of operation) depends on national and transnational expertise to engage in EU level joint activities and policy guidance. This is mutual learning among experts coming together through processes organised by the OMC format. Moreover, the interaction with national policy is practiced in an OECD-style peer review manner.<sup>74</sup> "Peer counselling brings together experienced peers from a small number of national administrations to provide advice to a Member State in designing or implementing a policy. It provides a forum for collectively brainstorming solutions to specific national challenges in a participatory workshop format".<sup>75</sup> At the EU level, the education sector still upholds its arrangements set up under the OMC heading. In substantive terms, the position of the education sector in the overall political project of the EU is maintained. The response of the education sector to the Europe 2020 strategy illustrates this quite succinctly. One of the seven "flagship initiatives" for growth and employment of the Europe 2020 agenda was "Youth on the Move", aiming to "improve the performance and international attractiveness of our higher education institutions and raise the quality of all levels of education and training in the EU, combining both excellence and equity".<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the 2020 strategy proposed five headline targets, amongst them one centred on two key issues in education policy: cutting the school dropout rate from 15 per cent to below 10 per cent and increasing the number of young people with a university degree or diploma from less than a third to at least 40 percent. In May 2010 the EU's education ministers agreed to recommend the numerical average targets that the Commission had proposed as part of the Europe 2020 strategy, although these had met with considerable resistance from several Member States.<sup>77</sup> Traditional territorial conflict lines between the supranational and the national approach to education policy can easily arise even after decades of cooperation through the OMC governance architecture. Yet, within the framework of the European semester, the Commission did issue country specific recommendations, which frequently encompassed recommendations on education policy. In fact, all country recommendations

<sup>73</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *Executive Governance of European Science – Technocratic, Segmented, and Path Dependent?*, in L. WEDLIN, M. NEDEVA (eds), *Towards European Science: Dynamics and Change in Science Policy and Organization*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015, p. 83 *et seq.*

<sup>74</sup> M. MARCUSSEN, *Multilateral Surveillance and the OECD: Playing the Idea Game*, in K. ARMINGEON, M. BEYELER (eds), *The OECD and European Welfare States*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar 2002, p. 13 *et seq.*

<sup>75</sup> Commission, *Strategic framework*, cit.

<sup>76</sup> Communication COM(2010) 2020, cit.

<sup>77</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 47 *et seq.*

that the Commission issued in 2013 contained recommendations on education, with the exception of the recommendation for the Netherlands, urging the Member States in many cases to exempt education from budget cuts.<sup>78</sup>

The numerical target connected to education also implied that the EU has called for a continued or increasing investment in education. This is not entirely self-evident given the financial difficulties most of the Member States were faced with in the wake of the financial and economic crisis. The Commission's approach to this was not to abandon the ideational support for continued and renewed emphasis on the education and skills sector. Moreover, the Commission used the EU education governance established under the ET 2020 and the crises to further underline the need for EU concerted action and a common strategy. This echoes the approach that was used when the OMC was first introduced and the first Education and Training programme was agreed upon. The sector's input in the Europe 2020 strategy actively referred to both skills and education as the main solution to Europe's economic predicament and the need for investment in the education sector. The assertiveness of the sector seems to have been enhanced in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy, and DG EAC has continued to emphasise what education can do for the economy and the labour market. The sector-specific governance arrangements are still a *modus operandi*. Even in the overall atmosphere of crisis – political, economic and financial – actors inside or outside the education policy domain did not question or deinstitutionalise this governance site.

Education has over the past 15 years become more strongly embedded as an instrument for other social and economic goals, and the call for stronger horizontal coordination between sectors has intensified.<sup>79</sup> Whether this can be attributed to the establishment of OMC governance architecture is questionable. However, it can be argued that in the long term the content of the EU level education agenda changed and the education sector used the governance arrangements set up under the heading of the OMC to pursue an agenda that related and adjusted the education sector's contribution to a general economic growth and jobs agenda of the EU. With this governance architecture, education could make its contribution more explicit, much more so than it could have done if the EU approach had been conducted entirely under the traditional student mobility programmes. Overall the governance site established on the basis of the OMC survived the economic crisis and has been further strengthened as part of the Europe 2020 strategy. The Council of the EU in its Education, Youth, Culture and Sports (EYCS) formation defends the position of education. European education ministers stated for instance in 2014 commenting on the European Semester that the EU should aim for increasing the visibility

<sup>78</sup> S. BEKKER, *EU Economic Governance in Action: Coordinating Employment and Social Policies in the Third European Semester*, in *Tilburg Law School Research Papers*, 2014, p. 8 *et seq.*

<sup>79</sup> H. WALKENHORST, *Explaining Change in EU Education Policy*, in *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2008, p. 567 *et seq.*

of education and training in the 2014 European Semester. In so doing, the Council agreed to focus on the following issue: working toward the modernisation of education and training and the development of skills through long-term investment.<sup>80</sup>

The extent to which European discourse results in national action remains questionable – from 2000 to 2013 the EU average spending on education dropped, as did spending in a majority of the Member States.<sup>81</sup> The overall country recommendations as part of the European Semester have indeed commented on and criticised this fact. The same can be seen in the comments and communications from DG EAC specifically. The sector-oriented OMC governance architecture has also spurred the call for more cross-sectoral coordination – i.e., not only coordination between EU and national action but also horizontal coordination. This is very much in line with the Post New Public Management approach to governance<sup>82</sup> – linking, for instance, policy for inclusiveness in the EU to education policy with calls for reforms, priorities and investment in the education sector more closely aligned with the employment sector.<sup>83</sup> Here we see the same pattern as when the OMC was first introduced to the education sector, that is, the tension and interaction with labour market policy as the neighbouring policy domain.<sup>84</sup> A similar dynamic can be detected with respect to the education sector's response to the refugee crisis as well as the fight against extremism radicalisation of youth in Europe. The Commission and the Council in the education sector responded to the crisis by offering the use of education and training strategies for integrating recently arrived immigrants.<sup>85</sup> This emphasis is added to the adjusted work programme of ET 2020 from 2015 and it makes this link explicit. The education ministers and DG EAC argue that the emphasis on employability, skills and innovation – long term topics under the ET 2010/2020 programmes – can not only contribute to increasing social mobility and equality, but can also be used to prevent radicalisation.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Council Conclusions of 24 February 2014, *Efficient and Innovative Education and Training to Invest in Skills – Supporting the 2014 European Semester*.

<sup>81</sup> Commission, *Education and Training Monitor 2016*, ec.europa.eu; Commission, Directorate General Education and Culture, *Education and Training Monitor 2017 – Summary*, 2017, ec.europa.eu.

<sup>82</sup> T. CHRISTENSEN, P. LÆGREID, *Democracy and Administrative Policy: Contrasting Elements of New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM*, in *European Political Science Review*, 2011, p. 125 *et seq.*

<sup>83</sup> Draft Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on promoting socio-economic development and inclusiveness in the EU through education: the contribution of education and training to the European Semester 2016, data.consilium.europa.eu.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Commission, *New Skills Agenda for Europe*, ec.europa.eu; Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 47 *et seq.*

<sup>85</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, cit., p. 59 *et seq.*

<sup>86</sup> See Council Conclusions of 24 November 2015 on Culture in the EU's External Relations with a Focus on Culture in Development Cooperation, p. 4.

### III.4. SOFT GOVERNANCE AS PRACTICES WITHOUT A LABEL

In sum, the organisation of soft governance in the education sector has withstood the test of time for over twenty years. Progress on the EU benchmarks continues to be assessed annually in the Education and Training Monitor. Hence, the use of quantitative indicators is still prominent. The Commission and the Council have agreed on common priorities in the area of education and training for 2020. The focus is now on the effective implementation of those priorities, in particular through the set of ET 2020 Working Groups that are still in operation. Peer review is being practiced, as we have seen, along with *in situ* peer learning in the so-called PLAs that are taking place, attracting participants at the national level, and involving national administrations, experts and stakeholder groups.

Use of the concept of OMC, however, has fallen considerably in recent years in official EU documents on education. References to OMC peaked in 2014 (a search for documents in Eur-Lex with the search terms “education AND OMC” returned 57 documents for 2014 but dropped to only 5 documents for 2017).<sup>87</sup> The practices that were inserted into the EU education policy arena have thus been sustained but without the explicit reference to the OMC.

### IV. CONCLUSIONS: WHY IS OMC EDUCATION AN UNLIKELY SURVIVOR?

As we have seen, the governance arrangement of the OMC education had a considerable impact on how cooperation in the field of education took place at the European level and it continues to do so. How can this be explained? This *Article* has pointed to possible perspectives drawn from the study of organisational change. One perspective argues that organisation of governance arrangements depends on functional performance; another power-oriented perspective argues that survival depends on power constellations that uphold or contest such arrangements. Positions drawn from institutionalist scholarship are also relevant. One argues that organisations survive because they incrementally gain legitimacy and become routinized for actors once they have passed the critical infant stage or withstood crises that challenge their existence. If organisations on the other hand are adjusting to larger organisational trends and fashions then survival depends on the ebb and flow in popularity of organisational templates.

The new governance architecture under the label OMC broke through the “glass ceiling” of national sensitivity in this policy area. In this respect, the soft approach to governance matched the need and norms of appropriate behaviour among policy makers in national administrations and EU institutions. The organisation of soft governance under the label OMC has certainly changed the approach to common decision-making in the area of education in the EU and enabled European level policy makers to enter into policy issues that had largely been off limits to the EU. This does suggest a func-

<sup>87</sup> The search form is available at [eur-lex.europa.eu](http://eur-lex.europa.eu).

tional match to the needs of the sector. Yet, does this imply that a functional explanation carries weight? The obvious counter observation in this case is the overt lack of substantive impact on national policy and national policy output. Progress towards the goals set in the ET 2010 and ET 2020 has either been negligible or at best hard to attribute to the activities that take place within the OMC governance architecture. The OMC in this respect did not “deliver” and should – according to the functional perspective – have been dismantled. We need additional explanations as to why this organisational structure has survived for almost two decades despite the lack of delivery.

There are elements here that are better understood as the consequence of the power constellations in the education sector. First of all, the inception of the OMC in education was perceived as fitting the Member States preferences, i.e. Member States that guard their national prerogative but prefer low and soft levels of joint action despite “national sensitivities” in education.<sup>88</sup> This is not merely a relevant perspective on the power constellations along the vertical axis, i.e. between the Member States and the agenda for integration driven by the supranational Commission; there is also clear evidence of the role played by power constellations along the horizontal axis, i.e. between sectors. Member States’ education policy actors defended and promoted the education sector faced with challenges especially from the employment policy and labour-market portfolios. Here they used the OMC governance architecture as the platform to defend what they saw as their education policy territory. The Commission’s administration joined in this battle and facilitated this defence.<sup>89</sup> Yet, the politics of organisational change and survival does not entirely account for the persistence of this governance site – especially the role of the Commission’s DG EAC supports an institutional argument. The organisational change as fashion and fad was an element in the inception of the OMC education and helped define it as the appropriate method. DG EAC – especially its civil servants with OMC experience from other Commission DGs – took part in spreading and interpreting the OMC concept. Yet, the subsequent dynamic of OMC education did not “follow the fashion”. The practices were not abandoned even though the OMC label went out of style and in some ways fell into disrepute. DG EAC’s administration continued to devote organisational capacity to the OMC and was able to build on existing organisational structures and procedures to fill the OMC template with new routines and practices that proved to be resilient even in turbulent times. The DG’s civil servants carefully nurtured and adjusted the OMC arrangements and saw it through its infancy and the challenges that arose in its first and second decades. This established OMC education as the appropriate and legitimate approach to cooperation in a nationally sensitive area and these arrangements, voluntary for the Member States, were at-

<sup>88</sup> R. DE RUITER, *Variations on a Theme. Governing the Knowledge-based Society in the EU through Methods of Open Coordination in Education and R&D*, in *European Integration*, 2010, p.157 *et seq.*

<sup>89</sup> Å. GORNITZKA, *The European Governance of Education Policy*, *cit.*, p. 47 *et seq.*

tached to the existing procedures and programmes and were able also to latch onto parallel processes of coordination in the EU education policy arena. In this respect, the case of the OMC education is marked by increasing institutionalisation and normalisation of practices of coordination. The OMC-like organisational arrangements and practices proved to be relatively resilient to changes in external circumstances, even in times of considerable political turbulence in the EU.

